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ABSTRACT

Supervisors who evaluate staff members' performances often do not have first hand information concerning those performances. Consequently, the staff member is sometimes not aware of what caused a person's success or failure. In order to give constructive feedback to an employee, a supervisor or another colleague could observe the staff member at meetings, in group counseling sessions, or in advising sessions. The goal of such observations would be to help staff improve listening, speaking, questioning, interpersonal, and organizational skills. Observation has been previously used in faculty development. This process can be adapted for professional staff by using voluntary participation by staff who, after training, would become consultants for each other. In a sample process, an observer takes non-evaluative notes on a meeting which include content, process, questions asked, responses from staff, and who talked. Follow-up discussions between observer and observed are then held. Observer consultants could be training during a workshop which explains the qualities of an effective worker, defines the helping relationship, and teaches observation techniques. (ABL)

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COLLEAGUE OBSERVATION:

A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP

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COLLEAGUE OBSERVATION: A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP

Most employees are desirous of, but receive little, constructive feedback on their work for the purpose of professional growth. As one solution the workshop described teaches a colleague to colleague approach which is non-threatening, requires few resources and can be applied in a variety of settings. The interaction sessions of the workshop encourage staff members, through discussion and role playing, to share assumptions, become sensitive to alternative perceptions and practice specific skills. One positive result is that staff indicate a renewed interest in their leadership which they feel has been strengthened by the process.

COLLEAGUE OBSERVATION: A PROFESSIONAL

DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP

Each year a staff member receives a performance evaluation from a superior. Often these written evaluations are not made on first hand information and few specifics are cited. Yes, the supervisor knows the basics - if the employee is on time for meetings, if he/she contributes to discussions, if the employee meets deadlines on written assignments; but the supervisor doesn't see the employee in action. The consequence is that the employee is not necessarily aware of what caused success or the lack of it. The question for the supervisor becomes "How can I provide constructive feedback to my subordinates?" So, how can the supervisor assist the employee with the analysis of the employee's job performance? One method to which this article speaks, involves observation by either the supervisor or a colleague of the staff member. The activities observed might include staff meetings, group counseling, or advising sessions. The emphasis in the observation process is not on evaluation, but rather on ways to help staff improve their performance from a developmental perspective (example: listening, speaking, questioning, interpersonal and organizational skills).

Observation processes, as a developmental activity, are most commonly described in faculty developmental literature (Lindquist, 1979; Nelson and Siegel, 1980; Quehl, 1978, 1979, 1980). The faculty consultant process involves a faculty member and trusted colleague who observes a faculty member's classes and provides a written account of activity. We have adapted the consultant concept so that professional staff can benefit from the process developed with faculty in mind. This adaptation calls for voluntary participation by staff members who would, after training, become consultants for each other. This

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colleague to colleague approach is non-threatening, requires few resources, and can be applied in a variety of settings for the purpose of initiating personal and professional development. The concept is easily introduced to staff through a professional development workshop, offered by the chief student affairs officer.

Nature of the Process

We spent a year observing each other in our work environments. This was possible because we were participating in many of the same activities. The activity produced in us (1) greater awareness of our roles in meetings; (2) increased discussion about how we could strengthen our group leadership skills; (3) increased ability to provide constructive criticism and feedback. For us, it was a growth experience, one which we felt could be helpful to the rest of the staff.

To explain the process that led to the above outcomes the following scenario is presented. A chief student affairs officer, concerned about staff participating in meetings asks a colleague (the consultant) to attend a meeting and observe the group dynamics. Prior to the visit, the consultant listens to the officer explain the purpose of the meeting. The observer prepares by reading handouts, and other material pertinent to the agenda. While sitting unobtrusively with the staff, the actions of both the leader and staff are recorded in a non-evaluative manner. The data might include content, process, questions asked, responses from staff, and who talked and how much. Afterwards, the consultant and the chief student affairs officer review the meeting and the recorded notes. The follow-up discussion focuses on what the officer wanted to have happen and what the consultant observed happening. The person observed is assisted by the observer in interpreting the data and generating a hypothesis to explain what occurred. Advice-giving and opinions from the consultant are limited.

Instead, the officer is encouraged by the consultant to generate ideas and alternatives. Notes made by the consultant are left with the officer for further study.

At UMF the chief student affairs officer encouraged the use of this helpful process in many settings. Placement office personnel enlisted both internal and external staff to observe their job search seminars. Residence life staff observed each other conducting residence life staff training. Counseling center professionals used it in their team-taught courses and groups. Admissions and financial aid personnel experimented with it in their staff meetings. The process is also a means for studying the student activities advisor role with a student group or organization.

Training Staff Consultants (Observers)

The training was incorporated as a part of a three day staff workshop prior to the start of the fall semester. The equivalent of a half of each of these days was used by the chief student affairs officer to initiate the activity. During the fall semester, monthly follow-up sessions were led by the chief student affairs officer.

By having the training a part of the workshop both instruction and practice of the technique was provided so as to prepare staff members for this consultant role. The three instructional sessions were focused as follows:

I. What does an effective college student personnel worker look like?

II. How does one become a staff consultant?

   A. Define and discuss the helping relationship.

   B. Define and discuss colleague support.

   C. Interpersonal communication skills.

III. Steps in the consultant process.

   A. Alternative observation approaches.

   B. Techniques for recording data.

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C. Doing an observation.

These interaction sessions encouraged staff members, through discussion and role playing, to share assumptions, become sensitive to alternative perceptions and practice specific skills. It should be noted that there are two basic approaches to observation. One is to use verbatim note-taking and the other is to use an observational checklist. The initial training focused on verbatim note-taking.

During the course of the workshop, staff observed each other leading presentations. Enough were scheduled so that half the staff had an opportunity to be observed, and nearly everyone (20) had an opportunity to observe a colleague. Following each observation, there was time for the dyad to hold the post-observation conference. At the close of the workshop, the whole staff met. First, those who had been observed discussed what it was like to be observed. Then, the observers discussed what it was like to be an observer.

During the instructional sessions, the leader (chief student affairs officer) was being observed. In the final session, the leader and observer moved to the center of the group and conducted a post-observation conference for the benefit of the participants. The staff were asked if their observations matched those of the observer. After a general discussion of the process the staff decided to experiment with the process as a specific staff support and development activity.

During the fall semester, the chief student affairs officer held monthly half-day staff development workshops. There was an observer(s) for all workshops. Prior to the close of each workshop, the observed and the observer moved to the center of the group and did a post-observation conference. The total staff then critiqued the observer's feedback and shared their own personal observations.

Appraising the Results

The staff's reaction to the initial workshop and the follow-up sessions were positive and enthusiastic. An initial belief of the participants was that the observer learns as much as the observed. At the same time, they expressed concern over the difficulty they had taking notes and observing. There were problems in determining how to take notes, what to record, and how to refrain from making evaluative statements. The tendency was to record an evaluative statement, rather than to record specific actions, and then to give advice and criticism based on the evaluative comment. In sum, the participants felt the consultation helpful, but were aware that it takes practice to be skillful.

After the training program, the staff encouraged by the chief student affairs officer were on their own to voluntarily practice the skills and to visit and support other staff, as requested. Staff in the areas of admissions, counseling, placement and residence life were some of the first to use the observation techniques. They were encouraged by being offered the opportunity to learn about themselves, students, and colleagues. There was a renewed awareness and interest in the need to look at how they worked with other people.

Two differing opinions regarding the most appropriate use of the pre-observation conference surfaced. For some, it was an opportunity to explain what they were going to do and what they wanted the observer to look for. Some observers felt it was easier if they were told to observe a couple of things, as opposed to everything. The second opinion was that an observer should not be biased by being told what to note. If what a person is told to watch for is such a problem, it will be seen. Proponents of the second opinion indicated that, in these conferences, there was a discussion of the types of outcomes desired and how the leader intended to achieve them. For us, the preconference

took place about a week before the observation. At this time, both content and process were reviewed and weighed. We then made final program adjustments. No specific directions were given to the observer.

The observation itself presented two interesting issues concerning content (focus and organization of material to be presented) and process (how the group responds to the way the material is presented). The first was whether or not an observer can observe both content and process. The collective opinion was that it is difficult. Furthermore, it appeared that there were times when one was actually more important than the other. For some observers, the pre-observation conference was used to determine the focus (process or content) of the observation. This is not to say that the consultant focuses on one and not the other. It is only to suggest which of the two will dominate. The second issue pertains to participation. At the beginning, the observer tried to participate as a member of the meeting or group. This was not possible. One could not concentrate on note-taking and participating and do a good job on both.

Some individuals found themselves at meetings where they would have liked to have had an observer, but did not feel right asking some uninitiated individual to take notes. Staff suggested that, in these instances, it would be helpful to have an observation checklist. Through the fall semester's professional development workshops, a list of observable behaviors was generated and placed in a checklist (follows this article). A number of staff have subsequently used the checklist as an observation tool, but have found it difficult to use. To use it effectively, all its elements need to be viewed at once, and the person must be extremely familiar with them. The accompanying rating scale also seems to set up an evaluative (as opposed to supportive) type of relationship. An observer can indicate whether or not a behavior occurred, but the context, gained in a verbatim note sequence, is lost. These problems parallel those that the

college's faculty have had with classroom observation checklists for teaching improvement (Ferren and Geller, 1983).

The time commitment for this type of activity can be considerable. A pre-observation conference can take as little as ten or fifteen minutes. However, if its purpose is to review and critique content and process, then as much as half to three-quarters of an hour might be used. The post-observation conference can easily take an hour. Discussions focus initially on the event observed, but often branch into other related areas, particularly if evaluative comments are requested (i.e., opinions, suggestions....). A conference that is conducted immediately after the visit is perceived as more beneficial than one that has occurred at some later time.

The non-evaluative nature of the consultant process elicits both positive and negative reactions. The support and encouragement provided to staff members being observed is appreciated. A number indicated they were able to make changes based on the observation. However, staff found it difficult not to praise their colleagues.

The number of times two individuals schedule observations of each other seems to affect the non-evaluative nature of the process. One's consultation and observation skills are improved through constant practice. Our experience shows that as individuals come to know each other better through continued consultations, they become increasingly evaluative when they share their notes. Over time, the individuals also learn what types of behavior the observed can change and which behaviors probably cannot be changed because they are inherent in the individual.

There are some shared feelings which are experienced in the consultation process. The observed may feel self-conscious, uneasy (Can I live up to the other's expectations?), fearful of being viewed as incompetent, or excited

about the possibility of receiving positive constructive feedback. Often the person being observed will want to spend extra time preparing for this presentation. On the other hand, the observer may feel afraid of offending people; uneasy about biases and how they may affect the observations; good about being asked to help a colleague.

Suggested Adjustments

The idea of the observation was introduced to staff who then immediately began to use it in the workshop. A video tape of an unknown group of people could have been used to introduce and to develop observation skills and recording of notes. At the end of the workshop pairs of staff who could team up throughout the semester could have been formed to give more structure to the project, and to encourage even more to use the process.

One aspect of the observation that was important but to which little time was given was observation of the group member's participation. What is the responsibility of the group members and what do they contribute to the meeting or gathering? When this was tried, the affect appeared to be positive. Staff were more conscious of their contributions. More formal work could be done with this aspect of observation.

Extending Staff Consultation

After a successful first year, the question as to how to make the process a natural part of the on-going operation still remains. The effort now becomes one of shifting from a project classification to an accepted opportunity. There were several aspects which contributed to the success of the project; many of them should continue. Staff voluntarily participated with individuals with whom they were comfortable. The program is not related to the institution's formal evaluation process. There was a successful workshop and follow-up session in which the chief student affairs officer served as a role model.

Another campus might consider choosing this consultant process for one or any combination of the following reasons: (1) if there has been no previous on-campus staff development; (2) if there is a desire for increased cooperation and understanding among department members; (3) if there is a desire or need to encourage staff to use each other as learning resources. The accompanying cautions would be that the observation process takes more time than might be anticipated, and that expertise, as an effective consultant, is gained through consistent and regular practice in real situations. To be successful, the consultation process must be viewed as a staff-initiated activity. This fact, however, must be balanced with administrative support.

The real test is whether staff consultation makes a difference. There is no statistical measure of the impact of observation. However, staff perceive that it is beneficial in terms of increasing preparation time and improving attitudes. Staff feel they go to gatherings having thought more about the content and process; they perceive themselves to be both better participants and leaders. Staff also have a renewed interest in their leadership, which they feel has been strengthened by the process. Finally, there is a feeling of colleague support. Staff care enough to help each other grow.

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COLLEAGUE OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

For each item that follows: 1) indicate your preference of its importance, using the Importance Scale (IS); 2) indicate your judgment as to the extent the behavior was evident (Extent Scale, ES); and 3) indicate your judgment of the performance on the Appraisal Scale (AS).

IS	ES	AS
1. of no importance	1. not evident	Use a scale of 4 to 1,
2. of little importance	2. slightly evident	4 being high and 1 being
3. of some importance	3. moderately evident	low.
4. highly important	4. quite evident	Use N for does not apply.
N. no opinion	N. not applicable	

BEHAVIOR	IS	ES	AS
Applies current information in the field in relaxed and confident manner			
Encourages and incorporates criticism			
Accomplishes stated goals			
Gives clear explanations			
Exercises tact			
Lists reasons for decisions			
Uses positive words			
Has multiple ways to accomplish a task or solve a problem			
Helps individuals recognize the principles involved			
Uses all available resources			
Solicits and utilizes participant ideas; encourages participation			
Resolves issues before they reach crisis state			
Has a systematic means for dealing with information			

BEHAVIOR	IS	ES	AS
Deals with divergent points of view by making connections and getting others to consider them, offering them			
Exhibits insight by listening, accepting cues, grasping ideas quickly			
Analyzes and studies procedures			
Cares about results			
Does not manipulate			
Respects confidentiality			
Respects professional program guidelines			
Uses questions to check for clarification			
Summarizes and restates important ideas			
Offers opportunities to say no			
Gives credit to others for ideas			
Clarifies viewpoints by using examples, analogies and humor			
Encourages people to respond to each other			

BEHAVIOR	IS	ES	AS
Acts as a role model			
Questions own biases			
Admits weakness			
Shows empathy			
Deals with emotion of change			
Accepts change as part of growth			
Is Punctual			
Shows evidence of planning and preparedness			
Evaluates			
Helps set ground rules for participation			
Delivers what's been promised, comes prepared, etc.			
Laughs at self			
Accepts teasing			
Facilitates relaxed atmosphere			
Has sense of perspective			
Uses humor to relieve tension and to counsel			
Gives clear explanations in terms of directions, personal expression, knowledge			
Does not dominate discussion			

BEHAVIOR	IS	ES	AS
Encourages people to answer questions			
Asks for people to clarify their questions			
Asks probing questions to get participants to think deeper			
Demonstrates awareness of interrelations-interdependencies			
Knows when to reach closure			
Maintains an effective pace			
Helps people think in new ways (ex: asks different types of questions)			
Stays attentive and keeps discussion focused			
Establishes and maintains eye contact			
Answers questions only when sure of the answer			
Confronts people or problems or issues			
Voices opinions			
Avoids militancy			
Engages people in problem-solving			
Seeks out confirming data			
Has non-evaluative word usage			
Gives congruous verbal and non-verbal cues			